

# NATO's Fabulators

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‘That reptile’, Brecht once wrote in his journal, referring to Thomas Mann, ‘cannot imagine anyone doing anything for Germany (and against Hitler) without orders from anywhere’. The Manns had been spreading rumours around Los Angeles that Brecht was Moscow’s pawn: ‘slurs . . . they know full well can do a great deal of harm’. From the first prodromes of the ‘New Cold War’, a similar form of weaponized hearsay has been circulating in the US – with Trump accused of acting as a Kremlin stooge and winning the presidency through its patronage. What once seemed like merely an election-year contrivance of Clinton’s Democrats soon spread to Europe. There, without partisan inflection, it found expression in starker geopolitical terms when, in 2020, the European Parliament initiated an investigation into ‘Foreign Interference in all Democratic Processes in the European Union’.

The report of the INGE Special Committee depicted a pristine European Union threatened by Russian and Chinese designs. America’s extensive activity inside the EU was ignored – its European and African Command headquarters, 70,000 billeted troops, recent history of abduction and torture of EU citizens, use of European territory for CIA dungeons in the course of the War on Terror, industrial espionage and phone-tapping of heads of state, were all unmentionable. Instead, the Committee trained its attention exclusively on NATO’s eastern adversaries, decrying their attempts to ‘weaken and divide the EU’ through disinformation.

Such accusations are well-rehearsed. They are components of a hybrid war model the US has developed since the first decade of this century, in part through a network of NATO think tanks stationed across Europe devoted to the alliance’s expanded portfolio, which includes operations to manage public opinion – in effect the global *Innenpolitik* of US empire. As political parties have been transformed into administrative rather than mass-membership organizations, such centres of pseudo-expertise increasingly shape respectable politics. They provide readymade accounts of events and distinguish friends from enemies (however impoverished the evidence amassed or manufactured), marketing themselves as trustworthy by affecting an academic propriety. Europe is naturally a focus of such efforts given its geostrategic value for influence over Eurasia – the ‘chief geopolitical prize’ in Zbigniew Brzezinski’s judgment – at whose western extremity lies the ‘key and dynamic players’ of France and Germany. Integration of the greater ‘American-dominated West’ and the effective severing of relations between Berlin and Moscow is being undertaken in preparation for ultimate encirclement of the PRC.

NATO’s [cyber warfare](#) – namely digital and internet-based attacks including espionage, propaganda and sabotage of infrastructure – as well as other militarized interventions into civil society, are often presented as novel developments. But in fact they have much in common with US-NATO strategy in the early 2000s, when ‘competitive intelligence’ – the use of allied agencies to launder claims – was employed to heighten a sense of urgency and accelerate the move towards war. Prior to the invasion of Iraq, for instance, Italy’s SISMI played a key role in furnishing the Pentagon with counterfeit evidence, as [shown](#) by investigative reporters Carlo Bonini and Giuseppe D’Avanzo. Contemporary hybrid warfare also echoes its forerunners in focussing on domestic or allied populations. Snowden’s [2013 revelations](#) documented GCHQ attempts – a parallel NSA programme must also be assumed – to manipulate the public by dissimulation and simulation.

Yet in spite of such continuities, NATO’s think tanks – comprised of twenty-eight so-called ‘Centres of Excellence’ as well as US State Department-funded outfits like the Bratislava-based GLOBSEC – have clearly stepped-up the modes of propaganda developed over the last quarter century of American warfare. To provide a snapshot of this change, it is worth surveying a few of these NATO-affiliated organizations and their attempts to shape public opinion in line with the alliance’s priorities on its eastern flank.

NATO's Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence (StratCom), based in Riga and directed by Jānis Sārts of the Latvian Defence Ministry, was founded in 2014 to coordinate diplomatic and public relations as well as information and psychological operations. It was launched in part to repair NATO's image after the decade-long occupation of Afghanistan. A critical [report](#) by retired Canadian colonel Brett Boudreau, 'We Have Met the Enemy and He Is Us', found that there was 'no Allied joint doctrine manual on StratCom' – only a 'conflicting or confusing' set of policies. Accordingly, the Riga centre, given an annual budget of just under €600,000 and sponsored by NATO states on an ad hoc basis, devoted itself to developing the 'doctrine' and 'concept' of NATO communications, along with education, training and operational support. In 2014 it ran a seminar on the 'Weaponisation of Social Media' for 'Ukrainian and Georgian Government representatives'. It also publishes a biannual academic journal, *Defence Strategic Communications*, edited from King's College London.

The basic orientation of the Centre is articulated in Boudreau's foundational essay as well as various contributions to its journal. 'We Have Met the Enemy and He Is Us' called for the elimination of certain 'firewalls' – or divisions between disciplines of military communications. Public affairs and psychological operations, foreign and domestic audiences, political and military domains: such previously distinct sub-fields of propaganda should be brought together under joint control. Distinctions between psychological operations designed to manipulate audiences and the 'value neutral' dissemination of information in the realm of public affairs, would thereby be formally abolished. 'The foreign/domestic audience separation', wrote Boudreau, 'is a faulty foundation on which to base organisational structure.' The report furthermore recommended eliminating the division between political and military public affairs offices, so as to liberate NATO military personnel from strictures over directly political interventions.

The pages of *Defence Strategic Communications* are no less audacious. Two characteristic articles from the 2016 inaugural issue reveal much about NATO's new publicity strategy: '[The Narrative and Social Media](#)' by US Army Psychological Operations Specialist Miranda Holmstrom, and '[It's Time to Embrace Memetic Warfare](#)' by the Softbank-backed financier Jeff Giese. The former gives an especially stark framing of the contemporary media environment and NATO's activity within it; the latter demonstrates the extent to which StratCom has openly considered the use of disinformation. Holmstrom, for her part, aims at 'winning hearts and minds' via social media by employing 'simple yet complete narratives that can easily be reproduced'. She asserts that 'narrative', as 'a framework for the plot and setting of a story', is fundamental to 'propaganda' because it is a form of sense-making through which information can be shaped and remembered, and may even foster an irrational response to events. Much like the structure of the *fabula* in a work of fiction, propaganda uses 'set-up, conflict, resolution' to guide the thought and action of a target. This principle can be applied to the 'horizontal propaganda' deployed through individual-to-individual contacts, as on Twitter or Facebook. The form solicits activity and participation, and 'creates the illusion of choice, free will and personal decision-making'. Giese, meanwhile, advises using pseudonyms to mislead social media users. He recommends 'more aggressive communication tactics' and enjoins NATO to boost its capacity for waging 'memetic warfare' – or operations tailored to the online universe, in which the stakes are 'social control in a social-media battlefield'.

StratCom has also taken an interest in the software of private firms, where 'application programming interfaces' are recommended for tracking users through the tools developed at the Atlantic Council's Digital Forensic Research Lab. In a separate report on 'Social Media Manipulation', the think tank boasts of having 'partnered with US Senators Chuck Grassley and Chris Murphy' to buy interactions on each of their accounts so as to test the public's responses. A 2020 contribution to DSC, '[Deepfakes – Primer and Forecast](#)' by Tim Hwang, focussed on technical innovations of visual disinformation and the use of artificial intelligence in creating convincing false images and videos. Formerly of Google, the MIT Media Lab and RAND, Hwang, who is now at the Center for Security and Emerging Technology at Georgetown, was a participant in a 2016 social media experiment funded by the US's Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA). His article recommends building up 'connections with the technical media forensics community' in support of 'research on the psychological dimensions of deepfakes'.

Founded in Tallinn in 2008, the Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre (CCD) is one of the oldest of NATO-accredited Centres of Excellence, funded and staffed by a roster of EU-NATO and non-EU countries. It

deals with the technical aspects of cyber conflict, strategy and law. Since 2009 it has hosted annual international conferences on such topics – drawing hundreds of military, academic and government participants to Estonia – with sponsorship by US software, appliances and services firms including Microsoft.

The CCD produces NATO's guidelines for cyber warfare, compiled in the [Tallinn Manual](#). In its first edition, the *Manual* presented 95 'rules' to which states must refer in the event of cyber conflict. Aside from the usual rhetoric about the right to self-defence, the document is notable for its gloss on cyberattacks which cause 'injury or death to persons or damage or destruction to objects' – weapons like Israel's Stuxnet, used against Iranian infrastructure, are brought to mind – and the exemptions it makes for war against civilians. 'Certain operations directed against the civilian population are lawful', reads rule 31, including 'psychological operations such as . . . making propaganda broadcasts' or analogous operations 'in the context of cyber warfare'. Elsewhere, the *Manual* finds the use of 'ruses' and 'false information' to be permissible.

Central to the CCD's activity is the organization of regular military exercises. '[Crossed Swords](#)' was launched in 2016 as a so-called 'red-teaming' drill, in which participants simulate cyberattacks and test the ability of special forces to carry out an offensive 'full-scale cyber operation'. Since 2018, it has expanded considerably, and now includes the 'cyber-kinetic' use of the military – a domain of cyber warfare that can inflict real damage on infrastructure or personnel. Such exercises clearly exceed the CCD's purportedly defensive mission. '[Locked Shields](#)', inaugurated in 2010, is now one of the world's largest cyber-military drills, enlisting participants from groups in so-called Computer Emergency Response Teams to simulate 'the entire complexity of a massive cyber incident'. As well as academics, delegates from militaries, defence ministries and police agencies – including the FBI – are party to the war game. Journalists are invited to impersonate themselves in order to lend authenticity to the role-play. Private commercial interests are also present: the CCD for example has formal contracts with [Siemens](#), which allows for the use of its hardware and software, while the firm in turn uses the simulations to study its own weaknesses.

In recent years, the CCD has simulated attacks on a military airport, energy supply systems and central computer networks, along with the vandalism of websites, circulation of false reports, data theft, commandeering of military drones and hijacking of airplane refuelling systems. In 2019, its drill simulated the use of disinformation aimed at 'sowing doubt' among a domestic population, and dispatched defensive teams to counter the incursion through social and traditional media channels. As with StratCom, the CCD enjoys the benefits of connections with US think tanks and spy agencies: prominent among its ambassadors is Kenneth Geers, an Atlantic Council Fellow who has worked for years with the NSA and US Navy and served as a 'global threat analyst' at FireEye, a Californian private security firm.

Finally, the Bratislava-based GLOBSEC, established in 2005, is the successor to the Slovak Atlantic Commission, which was founded in 1993 to support Slovakia's accession to NATO. Unlike the Centres of Excellence, it is not overtly geared towards training the military and national security apparatuses of NATO states, but rather addresses Central and Eastern European countries, where it aids NATO's consolidation and expansion by integrating compradors into the circuits of transatlantic capital and officialdom. This is the purpose of its regular 'forum', which GLOBSEC describes as 'the preeminent international strategic conference on the frontlines of a newly divided world'. (The 2021 gathering featured a discussion between Victoria Nuland and the Moscow correspondent for the *New York Times*, as well as a session with Alexei Navalny's Chief of Staff, entitled 'Democratic Change in Russia: How to increase the Odds?')

When NATO's secretary general Jens Stoltenberg announced the 'NATO 2030' publicity campaign, GLOBSEC contributed a [series](#) on 'geopolitical competition in the information landscape'. It called for increased public-private collaboration to combat Russia and China, asserting that NATO must accelerate the subvention of small and medium-sized enterprises and NGOs. For this purpose, Riga's StratCom was proposed as a conduit; it could 'engage in enhanced interaction with citizens, including addressing disinformation, and promoting media literacy, and more.' The think tank also concluded that 'NATO's

storytelling’ must be sharpened. As a complement to its regular output of non-fiction media, it should consider branching out into fiction – recruiting studios and publishers in the production of films, books and video games. NATO should appear in ‘popular Hollywood movies or online streaming franchises’ and enlist a greater number of ‘creative and unconventional surrogates’. No culture industry asset can be discounted. Academia is another area where GLOBSEC is active. Its Slovak Aid fellowship integrates Belarusian specialists into the ranks of capitalist management by assigning them Slovakian mentors – namely, the economists and industrialists who oversaw the shock liberalization of the 1990s. GLOBSEC’s outposts in the Western Balkans act as the publicity arm of NATO’s eastern enlargement, most recently helping to facilitate the absorption of North Macedonia in 2020.

For all of the talk of a New Cold War, the political, economic and diplomatic coordinates of contemporary militarism are distinct from those of the twentieth century. Neoliberalism remains a global *pensée unique*, however battered its reputation is by successive economic crises. And the largest powers in the current face-off – the US, Russia and China – have either become more unequally matched in military affairs (US-Russia), or they have become essentially interdependent amid a far more fragile regime of global capital accumulation (US-China).

States must also contend with a number of internal stresses. One is the growing inability of nearly all societies to reproduce adequate employment and living standards for large segments of their populations – as can be seen in the rustbelts of both China and the US, the hinterlands of Europe and the downward mobility of educated urban populations. The political consequences are that states face the erosion of legitimacy and the eruption of ‘populist’ or other discontents. Flagging economic performance has led capital’s dependence on the state to become increasingly direct: where profitable investment in production is difficult, upward redistribution through corruption has taken hold, in a process [anatomized](#) by Robert Brenner. Sectors of capital closest to the state – finance, plus those which orbit the military, police and intelligence services – stand to benefit economically, but they may also anticipate that society will become increasingly unmanageable without greater levels of repression. Efforts to secure rule by consent today encounter domestic as well as international opposition, as rival sectors within national economies find their interests as much in conflict with one another as with international competitors. The upshot is concentration for politically well-connected firms, and a move towards confrontation abroad.

In the US, atop this sits a layer of imperial strategists committed to the constraint and management of China along with the integration of Russia into the American sphere of influence. Until 2018, war between America and its designated Eurasian rivals was not so openly anticipated. Today, their independent and uncooperative paths of development – forced by the economic realities putting all societies under pressure – have become an ineluctable source of friction. A coordinated revaluation of the yuan, or a rise in Chinese wages, might boost US manufacturing competitiveness, but would undercut the PRC’s world-historic export-led growth model, dependent as it is on combining rock-bottom labour costs with high-tech assembly. At the same time, the tightened US noose around Russia – by depriving its industry of cheap energy – obstructs Germany’s profitable export to China of its machine tools and their services: a lifeline during the last decade’s eurocrisis.

As the relationship between the major zones of global capitalism has capsized into open and sustained antagonism, the shaping of European public opinion has acquired greater significance. Overdetermined by domestic and international pressures, issuing from a zero-sum contest between national manufacturers and across different sectors, Washington is above all concerned with the consolidation of Europe as an Atlanticist stronghold. Here, Ukraine acts as ‘a geopolitical pivot’, as Brzezinski put it. Without it, ‘Russia ceases to be a Eurasian empire’.

For a few large European companies, this security programme has clear economic benefits. But for the majority of the European population – who are instructed to ‘freeze for peace’ – its costs will be significant. The destruction of vital domestic industries and inflation of military budgets will follow the decades of austerity inflicted on the social state. Injunctions to intensify ‘memetic’, psychological and information warfare must be understood in this context. The exercises in digital sabotage undertaken by the CCD and its affiliates indicate that NATO’s propaganda is ultimately designed to condition the populations of client states to accept their fate as decreed by Washington. Since the War on Terror, the

alliance has shown itself capable of impressive adaptation, learning from its self-diagnosed errors in a mode of low cunning. Anti-war forces could do worse than recognize this last point and get habituated to cruder thinking.

*This piece draws on the findings of a 2021 [report](#) commissioned by the Left in the European Parliament.*

*Read on: Ed McNally, [‘Humble Grand Strategy’](#), NLR 140/141.*

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